

Students' Union Student Feedback Report (Summer Edition)

This is a shorter version of the Students' Union's Student Feedback Report for the Summer of 2022. Regular monthly reports will resume after September 2022. This report includes insights into queries received from our [Advice Centre](#) and Helpdesk throughout July 2022. This report also includes results from a qualitative project on students' transitions into university which was conducted throughout the 2021-22 academic year.

*Table 1: The source of data used throughout this report, as well as the number of queries or responses. *NB: The number of queries for Advice Centre and Helpdesk were collated based on those received between 1st and 31st July 2022.*

Source	Number of queries/ participants
Advice Centre*	146
Helpdesk*	125
Transitions in Higher Education: Pandemic Belonging in the University	11

Summary of this report

- The Advice Centre received 146 new enquiries; the most common query was academic related, such as academic conduct, appeals, progression problems / repeat year, and / or complaints.
- The Students' Union's Helpdesk received 125 queries of a varying nature. The most common queries were related to students' course / academic, merchandise in the Students' Union, Students' Union events, student societies, and academic representation.
- The Students' Union conducted a qualitative project throughout the 2021-22 academic year titled '*Transitions in Higher Education: Pandemic Belonging in the University*'. This project involved first-year, undergraduate participants and involved focus groups with participants at three points in their transitional period: enrolment (October 2021), mid-year (February 2022), and end of year (May 2022). The aim of the research was to understand students' experiences of transiting into university from post-16 educational environments. The details and findings are below. The full report is also available on the Students' Union's website [here](#).

Monthly Statistics from the Students' Union

The Advice Centre received 146 new enquiries between 1st and 31st July 2022. Most students contacted the Advice Centre by email or the web form (n=90), phone (n=35), or video appointment (n=10), rather than in person (n=11). The most common queries were academic related: academic conduct (n=31), appeals (n=21), progression problems / repeat year (n=10), and / or complaints (n=4). Financial difficulty was the second-largest theme, with students contacting the Advice Centre for funding checks (n=7), fee debt issues (n=5), and benefits check (n=4). Only 5 queries were related to housing, with students seeking to leave a tenancy / contract. Of all queries received in the Advice Centre, 52 involved signposting to another service in the SU, the University, or externally / other.

The Helpdesk received 125 enquiries between 1st and 31st July 2022. Many students asked for help face-to-face (n=60), though others sought assistance via email (n=42), live chat on the website (n=16), and phone (n=7). Queries in the Helpdesk vary greatly, though 23 were course / academic related, such as dissertation support, skills support, exam help, misconduct or appealing grades.

Where appropriate, students were directed to self-help resources, the Advice Centre, University services, or their Course Tutor. Other queries were about merchandise (n=19), events (n=14), societies (n=7), and academic representation (n=5). Smaller numbers (n < 5) of students sought help with accommodation, employment, finance, food /drink, placement, or shuttle bus.

Transitions in Higher Education

The Coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19, has created widespread and rapid change to the higher education sector. It has challenged the readiness of academic institutions to deal with a unique crisis. Such abrupt reform raises a plethora of questions around first year students' transitions into university. Although there lay a foundation of research on students' transition into higher education, little research has been conducted to explore first year students' expectations, perceptions, and subsequently student experiences of these newfound parameters induced by the pandemic.¹ Therefore, this qualitative research project with eleven first-year, undergraduate students is a starting point to explore students' renewed expectations and experiences of higher education as a result of changes due to COVID-19. Below, the main findings alongside recommendations based on the research findings, are presented. [The whole report can be read here.](#)

- Participants spoke about their post-16 experiences with mostly bemusement at the lack of academic structure and social support networks available. This, compiled with examination cancellations and lack of transitional support (that would have otherwise been received on a more consistent basis), increased students' educational fragility when considering university. This equated to students having loosely defined sense of belonging in an educational context.
- Teaching, learning, and assessment was found to be inconsistent across courses with only some participants receiving holistic approaches to 'hybrid' teaching. Virtual learning was often described as uninspiring due to a lack of collaboration between course mates and often stale and non-interactive lectures. In turn, participants felt like they were not receiving the full experience, lessening their feelings of belonging and community, whilst also expressing concerns over value for money.
- There was a clear separation of participants who enjoyed working solo, compared to those who appreciated collaboration and dialogue with peers. Participants delineated themselves as 'extraverts' who enjoyed and found value in more face-to-face learning, whilst those who identified as 'introverts' shared their appreciation of virtual learning opportunities.
- Participants spoke about the hardship and loneliness of lockdowns and how it affected their motivation and engagement towards their course and general university life.

As this research has found, one's first year at university, for most, is a new and complicated life chapter. Traditionally, students are often leaving their established social support systems and are quickly presented with new academic, communal, and personal challenges. Considering the diversity of participants in terms of gender, linguistic, cultural background, age, socioeconomic and socioeducational status, there is no linear approach for helping students during this period of their lives. Kift et al.² argues, however, that any successful '*transition pedagogy*' must incorporate the

¹ Nyar. (2021). The "Double Transition" for First-Year Students: Understanding the Impact of Covid-19 on South Africa's First-Year University Students. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 9(1), 77–92. <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v9i1.1429>.

² Kift, S., Nelson, K., & Clarke, J. (2010). Transition pedagogy: a third-generation approach to FYE: a case study of policy and practice for the higher education sector. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 1(1), 102–111. <https://doi.org/10.5204/intifyhe.v1i1.13>.

curriculum and that constructing meaningful relationships with peers and staff is crucial to a successful transition. This research makes the case that universities should highlight endeavors to construct community and foster a sense of belonging among students amidst the transition to virtual learning.

Based on this research project, the following recommendations take into consideration the Sheffield Hallam environment to ensure that students transition into and through higher education is facilitated well, considering the nuance of individual needs.

1. The University should facilitate increased collaborative group working.

On the most part, participants felt as though a combination of lockdowns and stagnant online learning sessions limited space for student-to-student collaboration, consolidating feelings of isolation and helplessness. In turn, students felt less motivated and able to self-direct their own learning. In placing a strong emphasis on the *collaborative* rather than the *individual*, teaching and learning in future academic years should encourage critical discussion and in turn, self-directed learning. As part of this, Sheffield Hallam University could consider training and updating teachers' knowledge in digital technologies so that they will be able to develop digital skills and competencies in their students.

2. The University and the Students' Union consider, and remain sensitive to, the long-lasting mental health effects of COVID-19, whilst embedding inclusive practices.

All participants shared the impact that COVID-19 has had on their sense of belonging in the educational context – both during post-16 and higher education spaces. Participants shared that the onus is on them to ensure that they belong to their university through various forms of student extracurricular work or by establishing connections with course mates themselves. Whilst Welcome Week is a time in which students, particularly first years, can embed themselves into their new environment, the haphazard nature meant that students struggled to 'find their feet' from the start. As participants shared, more could be done particularly at the course level to encourage students to feel indoctrinated into the Hallam community early.

3. The University to continue to track the impact that COVID-19 has on students' transitional journey.

It is important to understand that transitioning into HE does not end in the final semester of the students' first year. Meehan & Howells³ envisage transition as a pathway through each level of study. Using Willcoxson, Cotter & Joy⁴ data on student retention, students who withdraw in their second, third, and fourth years of undergraduate study are largely down to external factors relating to the University. These factors range from workload, administrative support, and teaching, learning, and assessment practices. As this piece of research highlighted, participants often struggled to acclimatise to the newly established forms of online learning. Continuing to trace the transitions of students who were affected by the pandemic during their post-16 education and beyond would garner further learning regarding transitional pedagogy and where, and how, the university can help.

END.

³ Meehan, & Howells, K. (2019). In search of the feeling of "belonging" in higher education: undergraduate students transition into higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(10), 1376–1390. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2018.1490702>.

⁴ Willcoxson, L., J. Cotter, and S. Joy. 2011. "Beyond the First-Year Experience: The Impact on Attrition of Student Experiences Throughout Undergraduate Degree Studies in Six Diverse Universities." *Studies in Higher Education* 36.